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Congress OKs \$1.9T virus relief bill in win for Biden, Dems

By ALAN FRAM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Congress riven along party lines approved a landmark \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill Wednesday, as President Joe Biden and Democrats claimed a triumph on a bill that marshals the government's spending might against twin pandemic and economic crises that have upended a nation. The House gave final congressional approval to the sweeping package by a near party line 220-211 vote precisely seven weeks after Biden entered the White House and four days after the Senate passed the bill.

Continued on Page 2



House Budget Committee Chairman John Yarmuth, D-Ky., center, is flanked by Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal, D-Mass., left, and Majority Whip James Clyburn, D-S.C., at a news conference ahead of the vote on the Democrat's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, March 9, 2021.

Associated Press

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Congress OKs \$1.9T virus relief bill in win for Biden, Dems

Continued from Front

Republicans in both chambers opposed the bill unanimously, characterizing it as bloated, crammed with liberal policies and heedless of signs the crises are easing.

"Help is here," Biden tweeted moments after the roll call, which ended with applause from Democratic lawmakers. Biden said he'd sign the measure Friday.

Most noticeable to many Americans are provisions providing up to \$1,400 direct payments this year to most adults and extending \$300 weekly emergency unemployment benefits into early September. But the legislation goes far beyond that.

The measure addresses



Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., leads the vote to approve a landmark \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, at the Capitol in Washington, Wednesday, March 10, 2021.

Associated Press

Democrats' campaign promises and Biden's top initial priority of easing a one-two punch that first hit the country a year ago. Since then, many Americans have been relegat-

ed to hermit-like lifestyles in their homes to avoid a disease that's killed over 525,000 people — about the population of Wichita, Kansas — and plunged the economy to its deepest

depths since the Great Depression.

"Today we have a decision to make of tremendous consequence," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., "a decision that will make a difference for millions of Americans, saving lives and livelihoods."

For Biden and Democrats, the bill is essentially a canvas on which they've painted their core beliefs — that government programs can be a benefit, not a bane, to millions of people and that spending huge sums on such efforts can be a cure, not a curse. The measure so closely tracks Democrats' priorities that several rank it with the top achievements of their careers, and despite their slender congressional majorities there was never real suspense over its fate.

They were also empowered by three dynamics: their unfettered control of the White House and Congress, polls showing robust support for Biden's approach and a moment when most voters care little that the national debt is soaring toward a stratospheric \$22 trillion. Neither party seems much troubled by surging red ink, either, except when the other is using it to finance its priorities, be they Democratic spending or GOP tax cuts. Rep. Jared Golden of Maine was the only Democrat to oppose the measure. He said in a written statement that some of the bill's spending wasn't urgent.

Republicans noted that they've overwhelmingly supported five previous relief bills that Congress has approved since the pandemic struck a year ago, when divided government under then-President Donald Trump forced the par-

ties to negotiate. They said this one solely reflected Democratic goals by setting aside money for family planning programs and federal workers who take leave to cope with COVID-19 and failing to require that shuttered schools accepting aid reopen their doors.

"If you're a member of the swamp, you do pretty well under this bill. But for the American people, it means serious problems immediately on the horizon," said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., referring to the added federal borrowing the measure will force.

A dominant feature of the 628-page bill is initiatives making it one of the biggest federal efforts in years to assist lower- and middle-income families. Included are expanded tax credits over the next year for children, child care and family leave — some of them credits that Democrats have signaled they'd like to make permanent — plus spending for renters, feeding programs and people's utility bills.

Besides the direct payments and jobless-benefit extension, the measure has hundreds of billions for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, schools, state and local governments and ailing industries from airlines to concert halls. There is aid for farmers of color, pension systems and student borrowers, and subsidies for consumers buying health insurance and states expanding Medicaid coverage for lower earners.

"Who's going to help? Do we say this is all survival of the fittest? No," said House Budget Committee Chairman John Yarmuth, D-Ky. "We rise to the occasion. We deliver." □

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Security camera hack exposes hospitals, workplaces, schools

By **MATT O'BRIEN** and
FRANK BAJAK
Associated Press

Hackers aiming to call attention to the dangers of mass surveillance said they were able to peer into hospitals, schools, factories, jails and corporate offices after they broke into the systems of a security-camera startup.

That California startup, Verkada, said Wednesday it is investigating the scope of the breach, first reported by Bloomberg, and has notified law enforcement and its customers.

Swiss hacker Tillie Kottmann, a member of the group that calls itself APT-69420 Arson Cats, described it in an online chat with The Associated Press as a small collective of "primarily queer hackers, not backed by any nations or capital but instead backed by the desire for fun, being gay and a better world."

They were able to gain access to a Verkada "super" administrator account using valid credentials found online, Kottmann said. Verkada said in a statement that it has since disabled all internal administrator accounts to prevent any unauthorized access. But for two days, the hackers said, they were able to peer unhindered into live feeds from potentially tens of thousands of cameras, including many that were



In this March 4, 2020 file photo, a security camera is shown on the second floor of a row of rooms at a motel in Kent, Wash.

watching sensitive locations such as hospitals and schools. Kottmann said that included outdoor and indoor cameras at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where 26 first-grade students and six educators were killed in 2012 by a gunman in one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history. The school district's superintendent didn't return a call or emailed requests for comment Wednesday. One of Verkada's affected customers, the San Francisco web infrastructure and security company Cloud-

flare, said the compromised Verkada cameras were watching entrances and main thoroughfares to some of its offices that have been closed for nearly a year due to the pandemic. "As soon as we became aware of the compromise, we disabled the cameras and disconnected them from office networks," said spokesperson Laurel Toney. "No customer data or processes have been impacted by this incident." Twitter said it permanently suspended Kottmann's account, which posted materials gathered in the hack, for violating its rules against

ban evasion, which typically happens when users start a new account to circumvent an earlier suspension. Kottmann had earlier received a message from Twitter suspending the account for violating its rules against the distribution of hacked material, the hacker said. Verkada, based in San Mateo, California, has pitched its cloud-based surveillance service as part of the next generation of workplace security. Its software detects when people are in the camera's view, and a "Person History" feature enables customers to rec-

ognize and track individual faces and other attributes, such as clothing color and likely gender. Not all customers use the facial recognition feature.

The company attracted negative attention last year when video surveillance industry news site IPVM reported that Verkada employees had passed around photos of female coworkers collected by the company's own in-office cameras and made sexually explicit comments about them.

Cybersecurity expert Elisa Costante said it's worrisome that this week's hack wasn't sophisticated and simply involved using valid credentials to access a huge trove of data stored on a cloud server.

"What is disturbing is to see how much real-life data can go into the wrong hands and how easy it can be," said Costante, vice president of research at Forescout. "It's a wake up call to make sure that whenever you are collecting this much data we need to have basic security hygiene."

Kottmann said the hacker collective, active since 2020, doesn't set out after specific targets. Instead, it scans organizations on the internet for known vulnerabilities and then "just narrow down and dig in on interesting targets." □

Associated Press

RICO expert hired by prosecutor investigating Trump call

By **KATE BRUMBACK**
Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — An expert on Georgia's racketeering law was sworn in Wednesday to help the prosecutor who's investigating potential efforts by former President Donald Trump and others to influence last year's general election. Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has engaged John Floyd to serve as a special assistant district attorney to work with lawyers in her office on any cases involving allegations of racketeering, her spokesman Jeff DiSantis said. A Fulton County Superior

Court judge swore him in Wednesday morning. In letters sent to state officials last month asking them to preserve evidence for her investigation into potential attempts to influence last year's election, Willis mentioned racketeering as one of the possible violations of Georgia law that she was examining. Floyd previously helped Willis when she used the Georgia Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations, or RICO, law to prosecute nearly three dozen Atlanta public school educators accused in a cheating scandal. In April 2015, after

a trial that spanned months, a jury convicted 11 former educators of racketeering for their role in a scheme to inflate students' scores on standardized exams. Willis was a lead prosecutor in the case while working for her predecessor, former Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard. Floyd will remain employed by Atlanta law firm Bondurant Mixson & Elmore and will be available to help Willis as needed. He was not being retained for any particular case and could be consulted on possible racketeering violations in a variety of areas, includ-



Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis poses among boxes containing thousands of primal cases at her office, Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021, in Atlanta.

Associated Press

ing prosecutions of white collar crime, gangs and public corruption, DiSantis said. □

Journalist acquitted in Iowa case seen as attack on press

By RYAN J. FOLEY

Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — An Iowa jury on Wednesday acquitted a journalist who was pepper-sprayed and arrested by police while covering a protest in a case that critics have derided as an attack on press freedom and an abuse of prosecutorial discretion. After deliberating for less than two hours, the jury found Des Moines Register reporter Andrea Sahouri not guilty on misdemeanor charges of failure to disperse and interference with official acts. The unanimous, six-member panel also acquitted her former boyfriend, Spenser Robnett, of the same charges after a three-day trial in Des Moines.

The verdict is an embarrassing outcome for the office of Polk County Attorney John Sarcone, which pursued the charges despite widespread condemnation from advocates for a free press and human rights. Those advocates, ranging from Sahouri's bosses at the Register to Amnesty International, argued that Sahouri was wrongly arrested while doing her job by covering racial injustice protests in Des Moines last May. Prosecutors argued that Sahouri and Robnett didn't comply with police orders to leave the chaotic scene outside of a mall



Des Moines Register Reporter Andrea Sahouri learns she's been found not guilty at the conclusion of her trial at the Drake University Legal Clinic, Wednesday, March 10, 2021, in Des Moines, Iowa. Associated Press

and interfered with an officer who pepper-sprayed and arrested Sahouri, who was on assignment for the newspaper. Sahouri, 25, immediately identified herself as a reporter but was nevertheless subjected to what she called "extremely painful" pepper spray blasts and jailed. Robnett, 24, said he was sprayed after telling the officer that Sahouri was a Register journalist. Sahouri was the first working U.S. journalist to face a criminal trial since 2018, according to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker. Although more than 125 U.S. journal-

ists were arrested or detained last year, the vast majority were not charged or had their charges dismissed. The Register's parent company, Gannett, funded the pair's legal defense, and employees of the newspaper chain rallied behind Sahouri on social media. Columbia Journalism School, where Sahouri earned a master's degree in 2019 before joining the Register, also expressed solidarity by promoting the hashtag #JournalistsNotACrime. "Grateful justice was done and @andreamsahouri was fully exonerated," Gannett

news president and USA Today Publisher Maribel Wadsworth tweeted. "But it should never have come to this. She was assaulted, arrested, charged and tried for doing her job. Today's victory is as much a victory for the 1st Amendment as it is for Andrea." Prosecutor Bradley Kinkade urged jurors during his closing argument not to consider that Sahouri was a journalist, saying her profession wasn't a defense against the charges. In fact, he argued that the video and photos she reported live on Twitter of protesters breaking store windows and

throwing rocks was "convincing evidence" that she was near an unlawful assembly.

Kinkade, an assistant Polk County attorney, argued that Sahouri and Robnett were within hearing distance when police gave orders to disperse, but that they stayed with the crowd. He said it didn't matter if they actually heard or understood the orders, which were given nearly 90 minutes before the two were pepper-sprayed and arrested as police tried to unblock an intersection. The orders were barely audible on police video that was played during the trial.

Kinkade also urged jurors to accept the testimony of the arresting officer, Luke Wilson, who claimed that Robnett tried to pull Sahouri out of his custody and that Sahouri briefly resisted arrest. Wilson acknowledged that he had failed to record the arrest on his body camera and did not try to recover the video later, in violation of department policy.

Defense attorney Nicholas Klinefeldt said the case was about a reporter who was doing her job and a boyfriend who accompanied her for safety reasons. He said Sahouri was reporting on the "destruction of property so that the community could see what was going on." □

Slender Man attacker says she has reached treatment limits



In this Dec. 21, 2017, file photo, Anissa Weier, one of two Wisconsin girls who tried to kill a classmate to win favor with a fictional horror character named Slender Man, is led into court for her sentencing hearing, in Waukesha, Wis.

Associated Press

By TODD RICHMOND

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A Wisconsin woman convicted of stabbing her classmate seven years ago to please internet horror character Slender Man said Wednesday she deserves to be released from a mental health facility because she has exhausted her treatment options and needs to be a productive member of society to keep progressing. Anissa Weier, now 19, has asked Waukesha County Circuit Judge Michael Bohren to release her from

the Winnebago Mental Health Institute in Oshkosh. Bohren sentenced her in December 2017 to 25 years in the institution. Weier submitted a letter to Bohren during a hearing on the request Wednesday. In the letter, obtained by WDJT-TV, she writes that she's sorry for the pain she's caused but she's learned to forgive herself. "I vowed after my crime that I would never become a weapon again, and I intend to keep that vow. I hate my actions (on the day of the attack), but through countless

hours of therapy I no longer hate myself for them," she wrote. "By petitioning the Court for conditional release, I am NOT saying I am done with my treatment. I am saying that I have exhausted all the resources available to me at the Winnebago Mental Health Institute. If I am to become a productive member of society, I need to be a part of society." She went on to say that she hopes to get some form of higher education and would comply with any conditions Bohren might impose on her. □

Russia slows down Twitter, part of social media clampdown

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV
and DARIA LITVINOVA
Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian authorities said Wednesday they are slowing down the speed of uploading photos and videos to Twitter over its failure to remove banned content — part of growing efforts to curb social media platforms that have played a major role in amplifying dissent.

The state communications watchdog, Roskomnadzor, said it began the slowdown after it said Twitter failed to remove content encouraging suicide among children and containing information about drugs and child pornography.

The agency warned that if Twitter refuses to abide by Russian law, it could be blocked entirely, but it voiced hope the platform would “take a constructive stance” and comply with removing the banned content. Vadim Subbotin, deputy chief of Roskomnadzor, said in televised remarks that Twitter is the only social platform that has “openly ignored the Russian authorities’ demand to remove the banned content.”

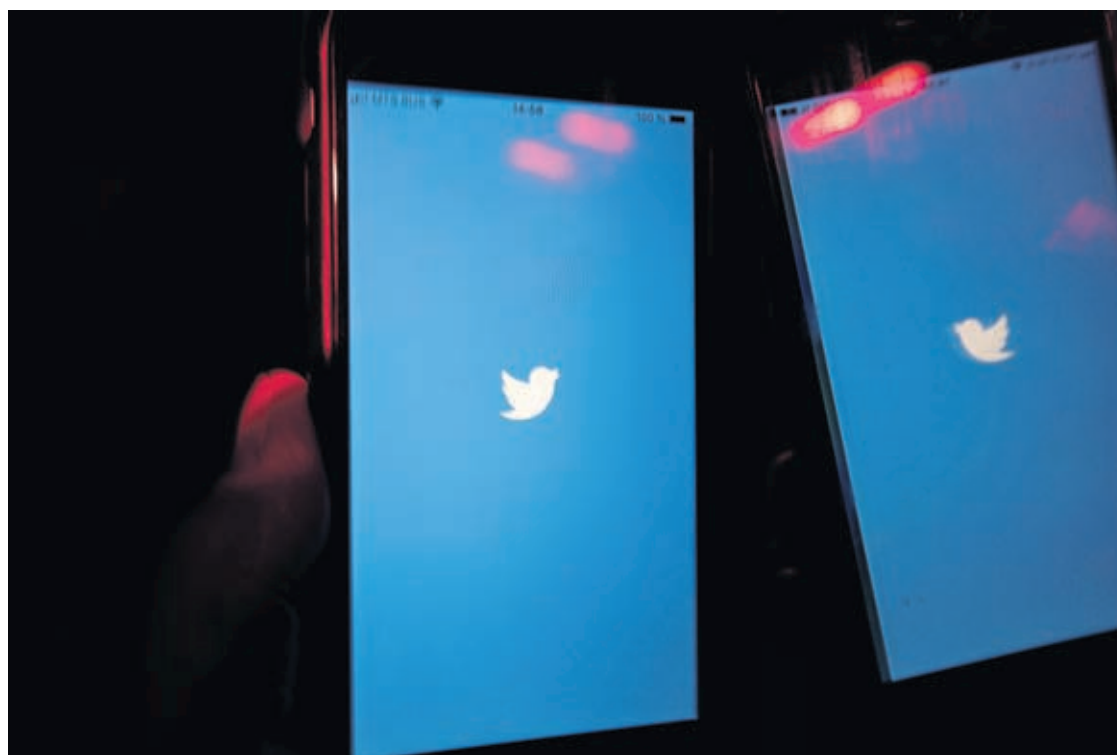
Roskomnadzor said in a statement that Twitter has failed to remove more than 3,000 posts with the banned content, including more than 2,500 posts encouraging suicide among minors.

The watchdog said the slowdown would apply to all mobile devices and 50% of desktop users nationwide.

Twitter’s user policies outline a host of banned behaviors, including prohibiting content that involves child sexual exploitation or material that promotes or encourages suicide or self harm. Twitter did not respond to email requests for comment.

Twitter is less popular in Russia than other social media services, with about 13 million users, or about a third of the number that Facebook has, according to data from web traffic research firm Similar Web.

But the attack on the platform could be “an artillery



A mobile phone user turns on Twitter application on his smartphone in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, March 10, 2021.

Associated Press

shot aimed, among other things, at scaring other major social media,” said Artyom Kozlyuk, head of the internet rights group Roskomsvoboda.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday the government has “no desire to block anything,” but added that it was necessary to enforce the law. The action against Twitter comes as the authorities have criticized social media platforms that have been used to bring tens of thousands of people into the streets across Russia this year to demand the release of jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The wave of demonstrations served as a major challenge to the Kremlin. Russian authorities have assailed the platforms for failing to remove calls for children to join unsanctioned opposition protests.

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin urged police to act more actively to monitor social platforms and to track down those who “draw the children into illegal and unsanctioned street actions.”

The move against Twitter is part of continuing efforts by the government to tighten control of the internet and the social media dating back to 2012, when a law allowing authorities to

blacklist and block certain online content was adopted.

“Dozens of laws have been adopted since then that expand the categories of prohibited information, introduce new restrictions (and) expand the list of government institutions that can carry out online censorship,” Kozlyuk said.

In 2014, the authorities adopted a law requiring online services to store the personal data of Russian users on servers in Russia and have since tried to make Facebook and Twitter to comply with it. Both companies have been repeatedly fined, first small amounts of around \$50 and last year the equivalent of \$63,000 each, for not complying.

The government has stopped short of outright bans even though the law allows it, probably fearing the move would elicit too much public outrage. Only the social network LinkedIn, which wasn’t very popular in Russia, has been banned by the authorities for the failure to store user data in Russia. In recent months, Russian authorities have also increasingly bristled at Facebook and Twitter, blocking Russian accounts and content, as well as Twitter labeling of government and state-

affiliated media accounts. Last fall, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused the two social media giants of “open censorship,” saying that “Russian media, without trial or investigation, are being labeled as allegedly unreliable, excluded from the search, blocked, and accounts are deleted.”

Two weeks ago, Roskomnadzor demanded Twitter to explain why it removed 100 accounts reportedly linked to Russia. Twitter said the accounts “amplified narratives that were aligned with the Russian government, ‘focused on undermining faith in the NATO alliance and its stability,’ and targeted the United States and the European Union.”

Dmitry Medvedev, who was Russia’s president in 2008-2012 when Putin had to step down because of term limits and currently is deputy head of Russia’s Security Council, complained last month that Twitter labeled his account as a government one. He said the American platform only does that “to countries, relations with which are not very simple. And they did not do this to their own politicians.”

The government’s standoff with social media platforms has been a “long process

in which the stakes are regularly raised,” said Damir Gainutdinov, head of the Net Freedoms Project focusing on freedom of online speech in Russia. “The authorities show willingness to take more and more stringent measures: ‘Initially we talked to you, then we fined you, and now we will slow you down’.”

As the Russian authorities slowed down Twitter, some government websites suffered outages and access problems. It’s not clear if the events were connected, and some experts suggested they could have been the result of unrelated cyberattacks. The Ministry of Digital Development acknowledged outages on some government websites but said they were linked to equipment problems at communications provider Rostelecom.

Some experts said, however, that a possible reason for the outages could be that internet oversight staff in Russia erroneously blocked access to a wide range of web addresses while moving to enforce Roskomnadzor’s order to slow down Twitter.

In 2018, Roskomnadzor moved to block the popular messaging app Telegram over its refusal to hand over encryption keys used to scramble messages, but failed to fully block access to the app, disrupting hundreds of websites in Russia instead.

Last year, the watchdog officially withdrew the demands to restrict the app, which has been widely used by government institutions despite the ban. Experts said that while there wasn’t enough data available to definitively tie Wednesday’s outages of websites to the Twitter clampdown, it wouldn’t be surprising if the two were connected. “I personally don’t have any doubts, especially after the situation with Telegram, that in order to achieve their political goals, the Russian authorities won’t hesitate to bring down half of the Russian internet,” Gainutdinov said. □

UNICEF: Syria's war has killed and wounded 12,000 children

By **BASSEM MROUE**

Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria's 10-year-long civil war has killed or wounded almost 12,000 children and left millions out of school in what could have repercussions for years to come in the country, the U.N. children's agency said Wednesday. The grim statistics were released in a UNICEF report ahead of the 10th anniversary of Syria's conflict that began in mid-March 2011. The war has killed nearly half a million people, wounded more than a million and displaced half the country's population, including more than 5 million as refugees.

Over the past year, the situation has been compounded by a severe economic and financial crisis and the spread of coronavirus in this Mideast country, where medical facilities have been hard hit by a devastating war that left large parts of Syria destroyed. The reported numbers of children displaying symptoms of psychosocial distress doubled in 2020, as continued exposure to violence, shock and trauma



A displaced Syrian girl sits outside her family's tent at a refugee camp in Bar Elias, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, Friday, March 5, 2021.

had a significant impact on children's mental health, with short and long-term implications, it said. UNICEF said almost 12,000 children were killed or injured in the past decade, according to verified data, and more than 5,700 children, some as young as 7-years-old, were recruited into the fighting, it added. It also said that since the

conflict began, more than 1,300 educational and medical facilities and personnel have come under attack. The agency said that nearly 2.45 million children in Syria and an additional 750,000 Syrian children in neighboring countries are out of school, 60% of them boys. It said the situation for many children and families remains

precarious, with nearly 90% of children in need of humanitarian assistance, a 20% increase in the past year alone. "This cannot be just another grim milestone, passing by in the world's peripheral vision as children and families in Syria continue to struggle," said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. She added that the inter-

national community should make "every effort to bring about peace to Syria and galvanize support for its children." Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces have gained control of much of the country with the help of his allies Russia and Iran. Insurgents still control an area in Syria's northwest that is home to more than 3 million people, many of them internally displaced. UNICEF said the situation in the northwest is "alarming," with many families that have fled violence multiple times, some as many as seven times, in search of safety. It said children have suffered through another long winter where many people living in tents and unfinished buildings battled severe weather, including torrential rain and snow. More than 75% "of the grave violations recorded in 2020 occurred in the northwest," UNICEF said. A Russian-backed government offensive last year on the northwest displaced hundreds of thousands and was stopped by a truce reached between Russia and Turkey, which support rival parties in the conflict.

Associated Press

Malaysian court rules non-Muslims can use 'Allah'

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia

(AP) — A Malaysian court ruled Wednesday that non-Muslims can use the word "Allah" to refer to God, in a major decision in a divisive issue for religious freedom in the Muslim-majority country. The High Court decision squashed a 35-year-old government ban on the usage of Allah and three other Arabic words by Christian publications, deeming the ban unconstitutional, said the plaintiff's lawyer, Annou Xavier. The government has previously said Allah should be reserved exclusively for Muslims to avoid confusion that could lead them to convert to other religions, a stance that is unique to Malaysia and hasn't been

an issue in other Muslim-majority nations with sizeable Christian minorities. Christian leaders in Malaysia say the ban is unreasonable because Christians who speak the Malay language have long used Allah, a Malay word derived from Arabic, in their Bibles, prayers and songs. The high court ruling appeared to contradict an earlier decision by the country's Federal Court in 2014 that upheld the government ban following a legal challenge by the Roman Catholic Church, which had used the word Allah in its Malay-language newsletter. "The court has now said the word Allah can be used by all Malaysians," Xavier said. "Today's decision en-

trenches the fundamental freedom of religious rights for non-Muslims in Malaysia" enshrined in the constitution, he added. Muslims account for about two-thirds of Malaysia's 32 million people, with large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities. Christians comprise about 10% of the population. Most Christians in Malaysia worship in English, Tamil or various Chinese dialects, and refer to God in those languages, but some Malay-speaking people on the island of Borneo have no other word for God but Allah. Three other words "kaabah" or Islam's holiest shrine in Mecca, "baitullah" or house of God, and "solat" or prayer, were also



In this May 16, 2019, file photo, a worshiper arrives at a mosque for Iftar during the holy Islamic month of Ramadan in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Associated Press

banned in the 1986 government directive. Government counsel Shamsul Bolhassan was quoted by The Star newspaper as saying that the four words can be used in Christian materials according to the court's ruling, as long as there is a disclaimer saying it is intended for

Christians only and a symbol of a cross is displayed. The ruling was a result of a long legal challenge by a Christian woman whose religious materials containing the word Allah were seized by authorities at the airport when she returned home from Indonesia in 2008.

Puerto Rico reopens public schools amid COVID-19 fears

By DÁNICA COTO

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Parents across

Puerto Rico knelt down on Wednesday to adjust their children's face masks and backpacks as public schools reopened for the first time in nearly a year despite the pandemic, with officials reporting scarce attendance amid COVID-19 concerns.

The hugs outside schools were followed by a temperature check and a dollop of hand sanitizer at some of the 95 of the U.S. territory's 858 public schools authorized to reopen because they were located in a municipality with a low number of coronavirus cases and had met a list of requirements issued by Puerto Rico's Health Department. Among them was the Ramón Marín Solá primary school in Guaynabo, where parents checked their children's face masks before hugging them goodbye.

"You can't touch it," a man told his young son who was tugging at his mask.



Students arrive at the Ramon Marin Sola primary school for the first time in nearly a year amid the COVID-19 pandemic as some public schools reopen in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Wednesday, March 10, 2021.

"It itches, it itches a lot," his son replied as he walked into the school for the first time as a kindergartner.

For now, only kindergarteners, special education students and children in first, second, third and 12th grades are allowed to re-

turn to school. They will attend in-person classes only twice a week and be dismissed before noon, with school cafeterias remaining closed, although there is a "grab-and-go" option. In-person attendance is not obligatory, and remote

classes were still being offered. "It was important to have in-person education once again, even if it's little by little," Gov. Pedro Pierluisi said.

"This is something we have to learn to live with," she said after dropping him off,

adding that she had no qualms about sending him back to school because he had a strict teacher.

Rivera and her husband were previously infected with the coronavirus, along with one of their three sons, but not the one who was returning to class: "He knows he has to keep the mask on." The schools that reopened Monday were located in about 50 of the U.S. territory's 78 municipalities, with openings and closures expected to fluctuate in upcoming weeks depending on the number of coronavirus cases in a specific municipality and whether any infections are reported at a school.

Union leaders and some parents and teachers have called on Pierluisi's administration to wait until August to reopen schools, noting the U.S. territory has not seen a significant decrease in COVID-19 cases.

Sheila Mercado, a Spanish teacher at a school that has not yet been authorized to reopen, said she feels the reopening has been rushed. □

Associated Press

EU lawmakers to debate declaring bloc an LGBT 'freedom zone'

By VANESSA GERA

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — The European Parliament is scheduled to debate a resolution on Wednesday that would declare the entire 27-member European Union a "freedom

zone" for LGBT people. The move comes largely in reaction to developments over the past two years in Poland, where many local communities have adopted largely symbolic resolutions declaring themselves free of what conservative

authorities have been calling "LGBT ideology."

These towns say they are seeking to defend their traditional Catholic values, but LGBT rights activists say the designations are discriminatory and make gays and lesbians feel unwelcome. The areas have come to be colloquially known as "LGBT-free zones."

But the resolution to be debated Wednesday also seeks to address problems faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer people across the bloc.

It says the fundamental rights of LGBT people have been "severely hindered" recently in Hungary due to a de facto ban on legal gender recognition for transgender and intersex people. □



In this Jan. 24, 2020 file photo, Bart Staszewski, an LGBT activist, holds up a sign he uses to protest anti-LGBT resolutions, in Warsaw, Poland.

Associated Press

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Shopping

The Paseo Herencia stores offer a great collection in beach wear, clothing, perfume, shoes, jewelry, souvenirs and much more. Pamper yourself by visiting Maggy's and enjoy their salon services and shop for your favorite beauty products. Aruba Aloe has that perfect gift to bring back home, all made with natural ingredients. Other brand favorites are Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Aldo, Carmen Steffens, Quiksilver, Pandora and many more.

Restaurants

Start with a breakfast meal at Chill Out Island Café for a fluffy soufflé pancake with your choice of toppings, breakfast sandwiches or acai bowls plus your favorite bubble tea. TGI Fridays offers breakfast options starting from \$8.57, available all day – every day. Go Argentinian style at Che Bar and try their delicious omelet with chorizo/ham, mozzarella, onions, peppers, and tomatoes served with skillet potatoes and toast.

These restaurants are also open for lunch and dinner and will delight



you with unique tastes. Choices run from Argentinian dishes to, Asian/Caribbean, International and Mexican at amongst others Iguaña Cantina. Sip and have a good time at the Bulldog Aruba located in the center of the Plaza. Open till 11pm.

VIP Cinema

Visit the one-of-a-kind Caribbean Cinemas VIP on the second floor of Paseo Herencia and enjoy your favorite movies with the latest projection and 7.1 Dolby surround sound with a delicious bag of popcorn.

Entertainment

Kids can enjoy the Paseo kids' activities, carousel & kiddie train, ev-

ery day from 6pm to 10pm and do not forget to catch the nightly water shows at 7:30pm, 8:30pm and 9:30pm. Another fun activity is the The Range Airsoft Experience lo-

cated behind The Lazy Turtle. Snap Instagramable pictures at the Angel Wings located between Pandora and Quiksilver and another one in front of TGI Fridays. Catch a live Show on Friday by violinist Angela Flores and Saturday by the acrobatic group Ritmo Cubano at 8pm on the Plaza Padu.

With any purchase at Paseo Herencia you will receive FREE parking in the parking garage. Paseo Herencia has implemented all COVID protocols according to the Aruba Health & Happiness code. It is required to wear face masks when shopping or visiting the mall to ensure a safe environment.

To learn more, visit the Paseo Herencia Facebook or Instagram page. [\[Link\]](#)



Most outstanding employees of Aruba Tourism Authority for 2020



ORANJESTAD – The team at Aruba Tourism Authority consists of professionals working together to achieve only the best for Aruba. The time and dedication this job demands can be rough sometimes, but the heart and soul this team of employees working in Aruba, USA, Colombia and the Netherlands put into their job, is always carried by the commitment they have towards our island and the most important economic pillar, our tourism.

Aruba Tourism Authority truly appreciates and acknowledges the effort and determination that each and every one of their employees have towards their job. In 2019, A.T.A. started a program namely Hi-Fives/Standing Ovation. The program permits their employees to acknowledge and give merit to their colleagues for different fulfilled actions. The winners are being announced annually at a special event, but due

to the protocols of the Covid-19 global pandemic things had to be done differently this year in order to ensure everyone's well-being.

Last Friday, the day started with a surprise breakfast for all the employees. The celebration continued through Zoom, were Ronella Croes, CEO of ATA, gave a speech in which she gave appraisal to the entire team and he winners were announced.

For 2020 a total of 148 Hi-Fives were registered of which three employees were chosen as winners.

Sjeidy Dijkhoff-Feliciano, received the most votes. She had many positive feedback given by her colleagues. She was surprised by her husband, who brought her flowers in her office and she also received a token of appreciation from Croes

Jonathan Boekhoudt was also one of the winners and received a special recognition. Boekhoudt was out of the office that day and was surprised at his house by his colleagues who brought him back to the office for the celebration.

The third winner was Josette Croes who was also acknowledged for her outstanding effort and dedication throughout the year.

Aruba Tourism Authority is grateful to be able to honor its employees by showing them appreciation and value. This action also has a positive feedback.

Due to this action their employees are giving the best of themselves towards their daily duties in doing their utmost to achieve the best for Aruba. Congratulations and a big Thank you goes out to all three outstanding employees of 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

Holiday Inn Resort Aruba presents blissful brunch that brightens your day

PALM BEACH — Sundays are to enjoy to the fullest, who does not agree on that. Corals Restaurant at the Holiday Inn Resort Aruba understands this as no other. For a great price you get great value: an extensive, scrumptious, full varied Sunday Brunch Buffet with bottomless mimosas. Take a seat in the cool dining room with full window view at the big blue. This is the definition of a chill Sunday start with big taste!

"It all started with the perception of the ideal Sunday. Sundays are for brunch and mimosas and it appears a trend to take it easy in the morning and indulge into a blissful brunch", says Eva Ruiz, Marketing Director of the resort. "Who does not enjoy to wake up late on a Sunday and take it easy with a coffee, mimosas and everything you crave for?" The Holiday Inn Resort Aruba started this relaxing brunch in February and is positively surprised with the overwhelming enthusiasm. Guests of the resort, outside guests and locals find their way to their favorite brunch spot. Chef Aldwin Donata could not be happier. "We change the menu every Sunday keeping in the all-time favorites. It is great to see that so many find their way to us, but honestly there is no place where you get this quality brunch for this price", he says with pride.

Boosting Brunch

Jump-start your day and let's do this brunch. Relax, dive in and look around to make your selection at the extensive salad station, soup station, Asian station, carving station, Aruban station, fruit station and bread station. All your breakfast and lunch favorites are here, believe us, and when you think you have fueled yourself with all



the delicacies you can imagine there is one more you simply cannot skip: the heavenly dessert station with all home-made pastries, cakes and a chocolate fountain. Sunday Brunch at Corals is a must, treat yourself and your loved ones because you deserve to maximize your day and get the best start.

For more information call +297 586 3600 or email the resort directly at [hiaruba@ihg.com](mailto:hیارuba@ihg.com).

Every Sunday from 11:00am to 2:00pm the Holiday Inn Resort Aruba is welcoming you, chef Donata and his crew will await you at Corals Restaurant for the \$35 Brunch Buffet (children 6-12 \$17.50) and children under 5 are free. ☐



Holiday Inn



Dutch Caribbean marines in training with the US marines



SAVANETA — During Exercise Caribbean Urban Warrior 21, Dutch marines from 32 Raiding Squadron Aruba, the St. Maarten Detachment and other units will undergo training in the United States. The training sessions will involve a number of challenging scenarios.

Joint training sessions together with US marines from the 2nd Marine Division take place several times a year in both the US and in the Dutch Caribbean. Training together with US units underlines the good relations that exist between these units and the two nations and enables the participating units to exchange knowledge and expertise. Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, offers Dutch marines posted to the various islands in the Caribbean a unique opportunity to train at an advanced level with scarce enablers in, among other things, urban areas. The Dutch marines will be hosted by Marine Expeditionary Force II (MEF).

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This unique training location enables CZMCARIB to train its units at a more advanced level than is possible at its own geographical location. Cooperation with US units and the addition of enablers (helicopters, aircraft, etc.), in combination with a current and realistic scenario, creates a challenging training environment for both commanders and marines.

In the preparation and execution of this exercise, explicit account has been taken of the travel and other restrictions that are in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to travel, military personnel have been quarantined in order to prevent contact with third parties as much as possible. Only personnel who have tested negative after undergoing a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test may take part in this exercise. All participating military personnel will travel 'bubble-to-bubble' on a charter flight from Aruba, via Curaçao and St Maarten, directly to North Carolina. The exercise will comply with all additional measures imposed or yet to be imposed by the American government and/or the USMC. The exercise will last approximately three weeks. □

Better savers spend less money on these 3 things

By **HAL M. BUNDRICK** of **NerdWallet**

Reducing spending in three common budget categories may significantly boost your ability to save money. And a small mental trick could help you stick to an ongoing savings plan.

Those are the findings of two studies investigating the spending habits of better savers and the psychology of saving.

Here's how to apply these habits to your own budget.

MOVING FROM A 'LOW' SAVER TO A 'MIDDLE' SAVER

Research conducted by the Employee Benefit Research Institute and J.P. Morgan Asset Management, published in June 2020, aimed to determine why some American adults save more than others, even when they have equivalent salaries.

For long-term employees, across age groups, the study showed that high savers save around 3% more than middle savers. And middle savers save about 3% more than low savers. Here's how the researchers defined low, middle and high savers:

Low savers save about 2%-3% of their salary.

Middle savers save about 5%-6% of their salary.



In this June 15, 2018 file photo, twenty dollar bills are counted in North Andover, Mass. Associated Press

High savers save about 9% of their salary, and more as they get older.

THE DIFFERENCE IS NOT A MATTER OF INCOME

It's often believed that low savers save less because they simply don't earn enough. However, in this study, middle savers and low savers have "very similar, if not the same salaries," says Katherine Roy, chief retirement strategist for J.P. Morgan Funds and one of six authors of the study.

"So they're earning the

same, but it seems like the middle savers somehow are able to save 3% more than the low savers," Roy adds.

And that 3% boost in savings "is huge," she says. It could explain why the retirement plan balances of employees who are middle savers are almost twice as large as those of employees who are low savers.

BETTER SAVERS SPEND LESS MONEY IN 3 CATEGORIES

Where did low savers spend more of their money

than middle savers? Three categories of expenditures, as a percentage of salary, rose to the top:

Housing, including a mortgage or rent, taxes, utilities, and home services and furnishings. Food and beverage, including eating out and groceries.

Transportation, including the purchase of vehicles, gasoline, train tickets and so forth. A high cost of living, such as having a home in New York or San Francisco, did not seem to be a fac-

tor in why low savers were spending more in these categories than middle savers, Roy says.

Travel was the only category where middle savers spent slightly more than low savers.

In every other category, the two groups spent very similarly. "That would include entertainment, apparel, education, charitable contributions, gifts those types of things," she adds.

HOW TO GAIN A SAVINGS ADVANTAGE

Considering your spending over a lifetime in just these three categories can impact your ability to save, Roy says.

In housing expenses, look for so-called subscription creep, where you've added several recurring autopay services that are drafted from your checking account each month. Streaming services are a frequent culprit here and can add up.

It's likely you saved quite a bit in 2020 on expenses related to dining out and travel due to COVID-19 restrictions. Roy says spending in these areas that was typical pre-pandemic but has been on hiatus could offer continuing savings long after. □

Homebound children drive surge in Lego sales

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Sales of Lego sets surged last year as more children stayed home during global pandemic lockdowns - and parents bought the colorful plastic brick toys to keep them entertained through days of isolation.

The privately-held Danish company said its net profit rose 19% to 9.9 billion kroner (\$1.6 billion) as sales jumped 21% and it grew its presence in its 12 largest markets.

Lego, which on top of its sets also earns money from video game apps, seems to be one of the businesses - like online retailers and technology companies -

that were well placed to earn money from the massive disruptions in society worldwide during the pandemic.

Chief Executive Niels B. Christiansen told The Associated Press that the "super strong results" were thanks to strategic investments made years ago to move more sales online. "This is not COVID-related. This was an evolution that started a while ago," he said.

"In 2020, we began to see the benefits of these, especially in e-commerce and product innovation."

He declined to say how much of the company sales were online but

noted that there had been 250 million clicks on the group's web page.

Consumer sales grew by double digits in all regions, with especially strong growth in China, the Americas, Western Europe and Asia Pacific.

The push to online sales helped offset disruption to business from the pandemic restrictions.

"We had factories that had been forcefully shut down and shops closed ... some have reopened, others are still closed," Christiansen said. The enforced closure of manufacturing sites were chiefly in Mexico and China.

"We had several times to



In this Monday, June 15, 2020 file photo, an employee wearing protective gear arrange boxes of Lego at a toy store at the Senayan City, in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Associated Press

hold back toys because movie releases were postponed. It was frustrating for us," Christiansen said.

Lego, which is based in Billund, western Denmark, said it wanted to further speed up investment in

digitalization. "The past year has shown the importance of having an agile, responsive business built on strong digital foundations," Christiansen said. "I expect that 2021 will see sales increase." □

Warming oceans mean smaller baby sharks struggle to survive

By PATRICK WHITTLE
Associated Press
PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The warming of world-wide oceans from climate change means baby sharks are at risk of being born smaller and without the energy they need to survive, a group of scientists has found.

The scientists, who conducted the work in connection with the New England Aquarium, studied epaulette sharks, which live off Australia and New Guinea. They found that warmer conditions sped up the sharks' growing process, and that meant they hatched from eggs earlier and were born exhausted.

The study has implications for other sharks, including those that give birth to live young, said John Mandelman, vice president and chief scientist of the Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium.

The scientists published their findings in the journal Scientific Reports earlier this year.

"There's this perception



In this Jan. 16, 2015, file photo, an epaulette shark, foreground, swims in the touch aquarium at Toledo Zoo's & Aquarium, in Toledo, Ohio.

they are very hardy. What it means is this very resilient species is more vulnerable than we thought, and this could be true of other sharks," Mandelman said. "We need to be especially vigilant about managing them under these changing conditions."

The scientists performed the

work by using the aquarium's breeding program for the sharks. They raised 27 of the sharks under either average summer conditions, or about 81 degrees Fahrenheit (27 degrees Celsius), or in temperatures predicted for later in the century, including about 84 degrees Fahrenheit (29 Celsius) and

about 88 degrees Fahrenheit (31 Celsius). They found that the sharks reared in the warmest temperatures weighed significantly less than those raised in average temperatures, and they exhibited reduced metabolic performance. The group wrote that epaulette sharks are well known

among scientists for their hardiness, so the negative impacts of warming raises a troubling question: "If epaulette sharks cannot cope with, in this case, thermal stress, how will other, less tolerant species fare?"

Epaulette sharks are small bottom-dwelling sharks that can grow to be about 3 feet (1 meter) long. Harmless to humans, they're named for large spots above their pectoral fins that resemble military shoulder ornaments. The sharks are listed as stable and a species of "least concern" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species.

The sharks in the epaulette study survived, but those raised in warmer temperatures emerged in poor shape to make it for long in the wild, said lead study author Carolyn Wheeler, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Massachusetts Boston and at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University in Australia. □

Bezos plans to spend \$10 billion by 2030 on climate change

By GLENN GAMBOA
AP Business Writer
NEW YORK (AP) — Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos plans to spend the \$10 billion he invested in the Bezos Earth Fund by 2030, the fund's new CEO said Tuesday.

Since Bezos announced the

fund in February 2020, little has been revealed about how it would be used combat the climate crisis.

Andrew Steer was named as the fund's CEO on Tuesday, and in a series of tweets, he offered a few details, including that

Bezos' "goal is to spend it down between now and 2030." That would work out to a pace of more than a \$1 billion a year.

"The Earth Fund will invest in scientists, NGOs, activists, and the private sector to help drive new technologies, investments, policy change and behavior," Steer tweeted. "We will emphasize social justice, as climate change disproportionately hurts poor and marginalized communities."

Steer, who had been the president and CEO of the environmental nonprofit the World Resources Institute, is the Bezos Earth Fund's first president and CEO.

"Lauren and I are thrilled to have Andrew aboard and very energized about what lies ahead for the Fund and our partners," Bezos wrote in an Instagram post, referring to his girlfriend, journal-

ist Lauren Sanchez.

Bezos, who announced plans to step down as Amazon's CEO last month to focus on philanthropic and science interests, cited Steer's decades of experience in environmental and climate science, as well as his environmental work with World Resources Institute,

which received a grant from the Earth Fund in November.

In a statement, Steer said he felt "incredibly fortunate" to join the fund.

"I will focus on driving systemic change to address the climate and nature crises, with a focus on people," he said. □



In this Sept. 19, 2019, file photo, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos speaks during his news conference at the National Press Club in Washington.

Conceptis Sudoku

By Dave Green

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			1					8
			7	5				
3						6		9

Difficulty Level ★★★3/11

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Associated Press

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Respectfully, Justin Laboy moves from online stardom to TV

By JAMIA PUGH

Associated Press

WEST HOLLYWOOD, California (AP) — One year

after his “demon time” Instagram Live sessions became a viral hit at the start of the pandemic, Justin Laboy has rebranded and expanded his social media fame to include a TV talk show with Diddy’s son and a steady output of conversation-starting posts.

The 29-year-old former professional basketball player, whose friendship with NBA star Kevin Durant helped boost his online profile early on, has gotten a shout-out from Beyonce and sat down with Chris Brown and Saweetie for the new Revolt TV show that bears the name of his social pages: Respectfully Justin.

Its Valentine’s Day premiere was the first time many of Laboy’s fans have gotten a chance to see his face. He’d stayed masked-up in most photos, lending a sense of mystery to his identity even as his witty and unapologetically risqué observations about sex and relationships grew in popularity. Shades and mask on, Jubilee 11s laced up as he promoted the TV



Social media personality Justin Laboy poses for a portrait at The London West Hollywood hotel on Feb. 10, 2021, in West Hollywood, Calif.

Associated Press

show recently at a West Hollywood hotel, Laboy said he isn’t hiding: “I’m an open book.” Laboy (pronounced LUH-boy) is his given name, not a moniker, and the social pages have always been his creation, he said. Laboy says he grew up the youngest of five children in a “broken family” in Queens, New York, and had an early ambition for “breaking gener-

ational curses.” He ended his overseas pro basketball career after two torn Achilles tendons and the realization that “I wasn’t going to be the next Michael Jordan or LeBron James.” His “demon time” idea last March — a strip club experience over Instagram, with viewers encouraged to pay dancers directly through online donations — got a mention in the New

York Times and drew high-profile attendees from the NBA and music industry. With clubs closed nationwide at the time, the nighttime event — signified by emojis of a purple demon and red wine glass — soared in popularity before being shut down by Instagram in April for violating nudity rules. Laboy says he was trying to help out-of-work dancers. “My mission was

bigger,” he said. “I didn’t want to exploit women or anything like that. I’m like, it’s a time for them to get some money in this, I don’t know how long this (pandemic) is going to last.” He couldn’t believe it when he heard from some of his Twitter followers that Beyonce had name-dropped the project: “Hips tik-tok when I dance / on that Demon Time she might start an OnlyFans.”

“It was stamped after that,” he said. His social pages relaunched in May with the Respectfully Justin name, and now boast 2.5 million followers on IG and 218,000 on Twitter. “I wake up every day like, oh (expletive). This is real.” Adjusting his blue-tinted sunglasses and hand-ironed black #Respectfully hoodie from his new line of merchandise Laboy is both comfortable with and continually astonished by his fame. He’s still trying to ascertain how much of his own life to show followers.

“When I’m jumping on a private jet or I’m hanging out with Meek or Drake, I’d like to put up a dope picture ... but there’s sick people out there,” Laboy said. □

Tardy Gras? Mobile considers Carnival-style parade for May

MOBILE, Ala. (AP) — Its 2021 Mardi Gras celebration all but a bust because of the coronavirus pandemic, the city of Mobile is considering staging a Carnival-style parade in May after the state’s mandatory face mask rule expires.

Mayor Sandy Stimpson discussed the possible parade with City Council members during a meeting Tuesday, news outlets reported. The event would be held May 21 to coincide with the commissioning of the USS Mobile, a Navy ship built in the city.

Gov. Kay Ivey has said she would let the statewide mask order expire on April 9 because cases of COVID-19 have fallen dramati-

cally and the pace of vaccinations is increasing, although health officials say everyone — particularly people who haven’t been fully vaccinated — should continue wearing masks. Ivey’s office announced Wednesday that Alabama’s Capitol and Governor’s Mansion were re-opening immediately in Montgomery for tours, but masks still would be required.

Stimpson said pandemic statistics are “excellent” right now and a celebration more than two months away is feasible. But he said there is still a lot of work to do and that it would be impossible to stage all the city’s missed Mardi Gras

celebration in one day. Dozens of parades are usually held along the coast during the Carnival season along with balls and other events, but nearly everything was canceled this year to guard against spreading the virus that causes COVID-19.

“I don’t think every Mardi Gras organization wants to put all of their floats into a parade,” he said. “It may be that an organization can put two or three floats in it. At some point, the parade gets so long we don’t have a route long enough to accommodate so many floats.”

Officials said the pandemic would still have to be taken into account, but



In this Feb. 12, 2015, file photo, the Mystic Strippers Society parade rolls along during Mardi Gras in downtown Mobile, Ala.

Associated Press

City Council member C.J. Small likes the idea.

“I really believe that there should be a very big event from food trucks, Dauphin Street partying,” Small said. “I mean very seldom do we have a warm day during Mardi Gras season. Us celebrating in May would be great.” □

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4	9	1	5	8	2	3	6	7
9	4	7	1	6	3	5	2	8
6	8	2	7	5	9	1	3	4
3	1	5	4	2	8	6	7	9

Difficulty Level ★★★

3/11

Unfinished work at a Players Championship that didn't start

By DOUG FERGUSON

AP Golf Writer

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla.

(AP) — Hideki Matsuyama made a 25-foot eagle putt on his final hole of the first round at The Players Championship and earned a spot in the record book as the ninth player to post a 63 at the TPC Sawgrass.

And then it was gone.

The opening round last year wasn't complete because eight players failed to finish before dark. The entire tournament wasn't complete because of the COVID-19 pandemic that wiped out the final three rounds at Sawgrass and the following three months in golf.

Now it's about starting over. The defending champion is still Rory McIlroy, who won in 2019 and who began last year with a 72, leaving him nine shots behind. On Thursday, everyone is back to even.

"I think I feel a bit better about that than Hideki does," McIlroy said. "If I felt for anyone last year because of all this, it was Hideki. That was obviously a hell of an opening round. But it's nice to be back, and hopefully I can get off to a better start than I did last year."

So much has changed in a year since PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan held a news conference — media sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, no one wearing masks — to announce the tour was shutting down. That goes beyond the



Rory McIlroy, of Northern Ireland, hits a shot from the seventh tee during the final round of the Arnold Palmer Invitational golf tournament Sunday, March 7, 2021, in Orlando, Fla.

Associated Press

weekly testing for the coronavirus and masks required for what is now limited attendance outside the ropes. McIlroy was No. 1 in the world at The Players last year and building momentum toward the Masters, his missing leg of the career Grand Slam. He had seven consecutive top-5 finishes around the world, including a World Golf Championship title.

He returns to Sawgrass at No. 11, out of the top 10 for the first time in three years. And after another pedestrian finish at the Arnold Palmer Invitational last week, he is starting to search for answers.

"The good golf is in there, and I feel capable of going out and shooting good

scores any week that I play on any golf course that I play," he said. "But it's the days where you don't feel so good that you need to manage it and get around in a couple under par. That's the challenge for me right now."

The struggle is not his alone. Rickie Fowler has gone more than two years without winning and has dropped to No. 70 in the world, with no guarantee he will get in the Dell Match Play in two weeks or the Masters next month.

Justin Thomas hasn't had a dream start to his year, starting with a barely audible anti-gay slur he muttered to himself at Kapalua that was heard by enough television viewers that it

led to one sponsor dropping him and another giving him a public reprimand. And then with a chance in Phoenix, he learned his grandfather — his dad's father, a PGA professional — had died.

"I'm doing OK. I have definitely been better," he said. "But at the same time, it's a good opportunity for me to try to grow and learn and get stronger because of it. I think it's kind of put a lot of things into perspective, and unfortunately for my golf, it's taken a toll on that a little bit, and I haven't been and I'm not playing as well as I'd like."

On the upswing are a pair of first-time major champions, Bryson DeChambeau and Collin Morikawa, who

approach the game in vastly different manners. Morikawa, the consummate iron player, was flawless at times in winning his first World Golf Championship two weeks ago. DeChambeau had another must-see week at Bay Hill by trying to drive a par 5 and winning the Arnold Palmer Invitational.

They are reminders that the Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass historically does not favor anyone. The winners include power players like McIlroy and Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson, precision players like Webb Simpson, Fred Funk and Matt Kuchar, and even a few surprises like Craig Perks.

"I love the feeling I have around this golf course," Simpson said. "I'm a thinker. I like plotting my way around and you've really got to do that here."

It has been two years since McIlroy won. He has played 42 times around the world since then, yet he still feels like he has a title to defend this week.

"There's been no one else's name added to the trophy after mine, so I guess I still am," McIlroy said. "Yeah, it's hard when you're so far removed from that win. It was two years ago, and a lot has happened since. I'll still try to rekindle those feelings and memories from two years ago, and hopefully that gives me the spark that I need to get my game in shape." □

Van Aert beats the pure sprinters to win Tirreno opener



Belgium's Wout Van Aert celebrates as he wins the first stage of the Tirreno Adriatico cycling race, in Lido di Camaiore, Italy, Wednesday, March 10, 2021.

Associated Press

LIDO DI CAMAIORE, Italy (AP) — Belgian rider Wout van Aert timed his acceleration perfectly to beat the pure sprinters and win the first stage of the weeklong Tirreno-Adriatico race Wednesday in a mass finish. Van Aert started his sprint with about 200 meters (yards) to go and narrowly held off Caleb Ewan of Australia and Fernando Gaviria of Colombia, who crossed with the same time. "I didn't really expect to win today in such a fast sprint

against Caleb Ewan," Van Aert said. "I was thinking of taking some time bonuses." He earned enough time bonuses along the stage to take a four-second lead over Ewan in the overall standings, while Gaviria was six seconds back.

The 156-kilometer (97-mile) stage began and ended in Lido di Camaiore on the Tuscan coast. It featured an arrow-straight 8.5-kilometer (5-mile) finish along the seaside. Unlike Ewan and Gaviria, Van Aert can also

hold his own in climbing stages and is aiming for overall victory. He won the Strade Bianche and Milan-San Remo classic last year and posted three stage victories in the Tour de France over the past two years.

He's also a three-time world champion in cyclocross. "Starting with a win is perfect for the GC," Van Aert said. "We'll see what the next stages bring but we've already achieved one goal today." □

NFL sets salary cap at \$182.5 million, down 8% from 2020

By **BARRY WILNER**
AP Pro Football Writer

Like Lamar Jackson under pressure from the pass rush, let the scrambling begin. The NFL's salary cap will be \$182.5 million per team in the upcoming season, a drop of 8% from 2020. The league's loss of revenues due to the coronavirus pandemic caused the first decrease in the cap since 2011, which followed an uncapped season.

Free agency begins next Wednesday, though the "legal tampering" period starts Monday.

The NFL is close to agreement on extensions of its broadcast contracts, but those deals will not affect the 2021 season. At least the current cap is \$2.5 million higher than projected last month. Last summer, the players' union and league agreed to a cap minimum of \$175 million, but that number jumped by \$5 million in February and was set at \$182.5 million on Wednesday.

"My stepson asked me this morning, 'Hey, is that extra \$2.5 million going to help you?'" Rams general manager Les Snead said. "I'm like, 'No, I don't think 2.5 is really going to help us.' If you look at where we are and look at how much we're over, 2.5 is probably a little bit of a drop in the bucket."

"Today's news, the extra \$2.5 million, isn't necessarily going to move the needle



In this Feb. 5, 2020, file photo, Cleveland Browns general manager Andrew Berry speaks during a news conference at the NFL football team's training camp facility in Berea, Ohio.

Associated Press

with us, but it is very, very helpful now to know that it's not going to be 188, per se. That would have been a little more breathing room. So to know now, we know what the finish line is. We've been running a marathon, and we didn't know whether we were going to run 25 miles, 24, 26 or 28. At least now we know it's 26.2."

It might seem like 182.5 million miles for the Rams: They currently are \$41 million beyond the cap.

The Eagles were over by about \$35 million and the Saints by \$33 million.

On the other side of the ledger, the Jets, Patriots and Jaguars had the most

money available, ranging from \$65 million to \$67 million. "I would say, obviously, we're better positioned than we were this time last year," Jets general manager Joe Douglas said of free agency. "I would say that our philosophy and stance has not changed however. I think our goal and our plan is to be ... a team that really builds this through the draft and hitting on draft picks, obviously using free agency to supplement our roster. If the opportunity and the value meet, that's going to be the point where we're going to be aggressive and get someone that we feel good about, helping this

team not only on the field, but with the culture and inside the building."

Nine players having been given franchise tags: receivers Chris Godwin (Tampa Bay) and Allen Robinson (Chicago); offensive linemen Taylor Moton (Carolina), Cam Robinson (Jacksonville) and All-Pro Brandon Scherff (Washington); safeties Marcus Maye (New York Jets), Marcus Williams (New Orleans) and Justin Simmons (Denver); and defensive tackle Leonard Williams (New York Giants). Their cap numbers are set by the tag designations.

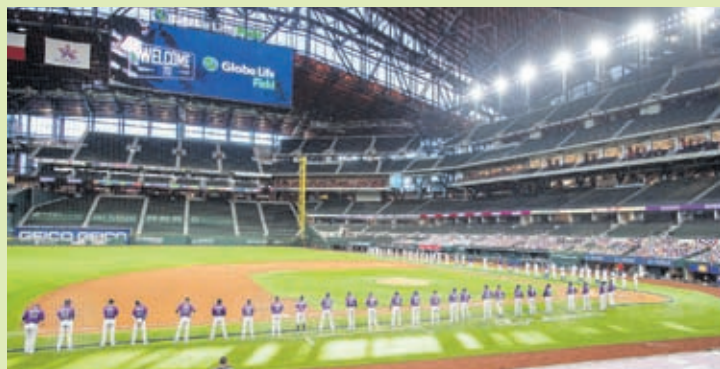
The rest of the free agency crop will be seeking big

bucks from a diminished pot.

"If you look league-wide at the available cap dollars, it is like 40% of what it has been in the past," Andrew Berry, Cleveland's executive vice president of football operations, said last week. "Look, a year ago at this time, generally speaking, I think everybody across the league thought the cap would be around \$210 (million). We were likely \$30 million dollars north of that. That means everybody across the league is going to feel that squeeze. We are not excluded from feeling that effect."

Panthers coach Matt Rhule notes that all 32 teams had months to get ready for the reduced cap and its implications. But the 2020 free agency moves were made under normal operating conditions. Now? Not even close. "We have been preparing for this, but even going back to last offseason the decisions that you have made and even decisions the last two offseasons when you set some of these contracts, everyone across the league did it thinking the salary cap would be \$210 million or \$205 million, or something like that," he said. "It's a reduction from last year but also a reduction on how you were planning. That is what is making people make really tough decisions. We have known for a while and have had to plan accordingly." □

MLB Rangers in line to be first team back to full capacity



The Texas Rangers and Colorado Rockies line the foul lines of Globe Life Field before an opening day baseball game in Arlington, Texas, in this Friday, July 24, 2020, file photo.

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — The Texas Rangers could have a full house for their

home opener next month after debuting their new 40,518-seat stadium with-

out fans in the stands for their games last season.

If that happens, the Rangers could be the first team in Major League Baseball or any major U.S.-based sport to have a full-capacity crowd since the coronavirus pandemic started rapidly shutting down sports a year ago this week.

On the same day that Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's order took effect allowing businesses in the state to operate at 100% capacity, Rangers president of

business operations and CEO Neil Leibman said the team hopes to be at that for the April 5 opener against the Toronto Blue Jays. Local officials would be able to impose "mitigation strategies" such as reduced capacity if virus hospitalizations exceed 15% of all hospital capacity in their region over certain periods.

Even with his order, Abbott has encouraged the public to continuing practicing social distancing measures and wearing masks,

even though they are no longer mandated.

After the Rangers played all 30 of their home games during the shortened 2020 season without fans, MLB allowed about 28% capacity at the retractable-roof stadium for the National League Championship Series and World Series that were played there exclusively. Abbott was on hand for the World Series opener, where he got to deliver the "Play Ball!" message before a crowd of 11,388. □